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Viewing cable 06BEIRUT2665, LEBANON: DEFENSE MINISTER AWAITS CABINET DECISION

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Reference ID	Created	Released	Classification	Origin
06BEIRUT2665	2006-08-16 09:37	2011-08-30 01:44	CONFIDENTIAL	Embassy Beirut

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 002665

SIPDIS

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DEPARTMENT FOR NEA, INR, AND PM;
NSC FOR ABRAMS/DORAN/SINGH/HARDING

E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/15/2016

TAGS: [MOPS](#) [PTER](#) [PREL](#) [LE](#) [SY](#) [IS](#)

SUBJECT: LEBANON: DEFENSE MINISTER AWAITS CABINET DECISION
ON DEPLOYMENT

REF: A. BEIRUT 2553

[B](#). BEIRUT 2583

Classified By: Jeffrey D. Feltman, Ambassador. Reason 1.4(d).

SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (C) During a downbeat 8/15 meeting with the Ambassador and poloff, Lebanese Defense Minister Elias Murr said he awaits a Cabinet decision on moving forward with LAF deployment to the South, but that his personal opinion is that the LAF cannot coexist for long in the South with an armed Hizballah. He argued that the LAF needs to be strengthened significantly and as soon as possible in order to counter the belief, as voiced by a churlish and patronizing Hassan Nasrallah in his 8/14 speech, that the LAF isn't capable of defending Lebanon on its own. Murr said that the relatively weak Israeli military performance, particularly in the conflict's final days, had bolstered Hizballah, which was why the group is now reluctant to give up their arms even south of the Litani. Describing the atmosphere in the Cabinet (Note. As of this time, the Cabinet session meant originally for 8/13 has still not taken place due to differences over disarmament. End Note), Murr worried that the Sunni leadership -- PM Siniora in particular -- are simply too weak-kneed to challenge the Shi'a on the disarmament issue now, and this unwillingness to stare down Hizballah would leave the materially unprepared LAF stranded in a dangerously-combustible situation in the South. End Summary.

"THE WORST ARMY IN THE WORLD"

[1](#)2. (C) Sitting in his study surrounded by a stunning collection of Greek Orthodox icons, Murr informed the Ambassador that senior LAF and IDF officers met on 8/14 at UNIFIL headquarters in the southern city of Naqoura to coordinate the deployment/withdrawal, noting that the Israelis behaved "sweetly" and asked if the LAF "could come tomorrow." Murr was amazed that the Israelis had already pulled most of their troops out of the South, even though the LAF and UNIFIL-plus might still be several days away from deploying. Murr complained that the vacuum left by the Israeli "defection on the ground" is being rapidly reclaimed by Hizballah. In addition, what he saw as the relatively poor Israeli military performance, especially over the last two days of conflict when dozens of Israeli soldiers were killed, had left Hizballah in a triumphant and uncompromising mood. "The IDF put us in a difficult situation," complained Murr, adding in a typical flourish, "They are the worst army in the world."

[1](#)3. (C) Murr said that Hizballah now believes that since it apparently fought the mighty IDF to a standstill on the ground, that it is therefore in a position to dictate to the Lebanese what terms it would and would not accept. Whereas it appeared only a week ago that Hizballah had seemingly agreed to the LAF deployment and the group's disarmament south of the Litani, by Sunday 8/13 Hizballah was no longer in such a generous mood, forcing the postponement of the Cabinet session. Nasrallah's speech on the evening of Monday 8/14 only further strengthened this feeling that Hizballah, as the putative "victor" in the conflict, no longer needs to make concessions. "Nasrallah thinks of himself as stronger than Abdel Nasser and bigger than Asad," Murr exclaimed, "Hizballah carries the banner of having beaten Israel. Nasrallah will be very aggressive now."

"NO KNEES"

14. (C) Murr admitted that the prospect of deploying the LAF into a zone still crawling with armed Hizballahis is not ideal and that, if he had his preference, he would not send the army to become "a filet" between Hizballah and Israel. Murr said that if the decision were to come down to him, he would rather resign than deploy into that kind of situation. However, he believes the Cabinet will ultimately give the final go-ahead for deployment, which he will abide by, though

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he thinks the question of Hizballah's weapons in the South will unfortunately remain unresolved. Murr said that he had pressed the disarmament issue during the Cabinet session on Saturday August 12, but that others in the Cabinet had not wanted to pursue the matter at that time. "My recommendation blew up the government in the last meeting." He said that Hizballah Minister for Energy and Water Mohammad Fneich had replied to a question about arms, "You want our arms that are protecting Lebanon from Israel? Come take them by force." (Comment. As he claims, Murr may indeed have pushed the issue during the last Cabinet session. An editorial by Ibrahim Amin, considered a Nasrallah mouthpiece, in the August 14 edition of Al-Akhbar newspaper noted that the "Minister of Defense said that he was prepared to deploy the Army to the South, but there should be no armed presence except the army." End Comment.)

15. (C) Murr hopes that the disarmament issue causes the next Cabinet session, whenever it is finally held, to "explode." Unfortunately, he said, the only people prepared to go face-to-face against Hizballah in the Cabinet are himself and non-Sunni March 14 members Joe Sarkis, Pierre Gemayel, Nayla Moawad, and Marwan Hamadeh. Otherwise, he lamented, "the Sunna have no knees and no experience" to go against Hizballah. "Saad (Hariri) should have been tougher from the beginning," Murr complained, while PM Siniora had asked Murr to be "firm but smooth" about the disarmament issue, and to "not cause him any problems." (Note. During the meeting Murr took a call from PM Siniora, who asked Murr to call back once the Ambassador had left. Inviting the Ambassador to stay, Murr called Siniora back after five minutes. The Prime Minister wanted to know what the Ambassador had said regarding the deployment. End Note). While the Sunni March 14 members want Hizballah to disarm, said Murr, they are unwilling to rock the boat for fear of exacerbating Sunni-Shi'ite tensions, and will let the Christians and Druze take the lead. Unleashing an arsenal of expletives, the Defense Minister complained that, "This is the problem with the Sunna, they want to f**k with the d**k of others."

STRENGTHEN THE ARMY

16. (C) Acknowledging that the deployment of the army will likely go ahead, but that disarmament of Hizballah in the South will likely be put on hold for the time being, Murr said that the best option is to strengthen the LAF and the UNIFIL-plus force as much and as soon as possible. Otherwise, Hizballah can continue to claim, as Hassan Nasrallah did during his televised August 14 speech, that the army is not sufficiently equipped and is therefore incapable of defending Lebanon. Murr wants to snatch away this trump card from Hizballah and its Iranian and Syrian backers. Hizballah, he said, had used "super-equipment," such as Korean anti-tank missiles modified in Iran to pierce the Merkava tank armor, in order to defeat the Israelis. The LAF also needs to be "super-equipped" in order -- and clearly here he was referring to both Hizballah and Israel -- "to resist, to defend, and to destroy if necessary." Murr asked if the LAF could be supported and rapidly equipped, so that in "three months" the Lebanese can come to the negotiating table and tell Hizballah thank you, but its arms are no longer needed in defense of the country. Murr basically explained that he saw the LAF gradually gaining the upper

hand over Hizballah in the south by a combination of new equipment to the LAF, beefed-up UNIFIL presence, and enforcement of weapons shipments to Hizballah.

17. (C) Regarding the monitoring of the border between Lebanon and Syria, Murr said that it wouldn't be a problem to move 7500 LAF troops there and to erect towers and radar equipment, and added that "UNIFIL will help." When the Ambassador asked how Murr planned to get Cabinet support for this plan, Murr waved his hand dismissively and claimed the "enforcement of the border doesn't need Cabinet approval."

COMMENT

18. (C) While his comments on border monitoring without

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Cabinet approval are clearly unrealistic, Murr seems to finally be getting a grasp on the complexities involved in LAF deployment to the South (Note. See reftels for his earlier, rosier predictions. End Note). Of the options facing the Lebanese government -- don't deploy the LAF at all, deploy but with an armed Hizballah presence in the South, or deploy as Hizballah disarms in the South -- the last is obviously the preferred choice. Murr prefers this option as well, but is willing to go with the second option if so directed by the rest of the Cabinet. His argument is that Lebanon should not lose the historic opportunity to get the army to the south, and that reequipping the LAF (and adding in the beefed-up UNIFIL) will tip the balance of power in the south to the LAF's favor.

19. (C) Murr's comments on Sunni reticence to challenge Hizballah highlight a real concern in the current political bartering in Lebanon. Unless Siniora and others from March 14 are willing to stand as one -- Maronite, Sunni, and Druze -- and compel Hizballah to disarm in the South now, disregarding all of Hizballah's and Syria's attempts to paint them as "traitors" in league with the "Zionist entity," then it looks as though the GOL will have to settle for the second option -- with the LAF, UNIFIL-plus, and Hizballah all armed and in the same bed, and a jumpy Israel just across the Blue Line. We have noted that the Maronite March 14 members remain outspoken on the issue of disarmament, despite implicit death threats against them in the Hizballah-allied media, while on the Druze side Walid Joumblatt will likely add to these calls during a press conference scheduled for August 17. The one weak point remains the Sunnis -- as well as Nabih Berri who, though he hates Hizballah, is unlikely to openly confront the group -- and we will work on stiffening the backbones of PM Siniora, Saad Hariri and other Sunni March 14 members to join in the fray, if not publicly then at least in the Cabinet, to press Hizballah to disarm at least in the South now. As we will report septel, the Ambassador met with Siniora on 8/16 -- a day after the conversation with Murr -- and Siniora is moving to retake the initiative in a step-by-step approach to UNSCR 1701 implementation.

FELTMAN